

Ash Wednesday

Jl 2:12-18

Ps 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13, 14 and 17

II Cor 5:20—6:2

Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

Joseph L. Farrell, O.S.A.
Villanova University
Villanova, Pennsylvania

What is your reaction when you hear a recording of your own voice? Most people that I know do not like what they hear and some do not even recognize themselves. This has some scientific explanation involving our vocal chords and vibrations in our heads affecting the bones in the skull and neck distorting the sound passing to our ear drums. All of this has an impact on the reception of the sound of our voice from our ears and the sound received in the ears of others. As we listen to the recording of our voice it offers us the opportunity to listen from a different and new frame of reference. We have the ability to hear ourselves as others hear us. We, in a sense, can hear ourselves from the outside.

Our liturgical beginning of the season of Lent starts today with Ash Wednesday. This day, when we are marked with a sign of our sinfulness and our need for conversion, marks the beginning of the time of the year when we are challenged to take a deeper look into ourselves and to examine our lives so that we can work on changing certain habits or actions which do not assist us on our way to building up God's kingdom on earth. We can use these 40 days to develop new habits that lead to great spiritual health through the pillars of prayer, fasting and almsgiving which the Gospel of Matthew highlights in today's scriptural reading. Jesus offers his disciples a certain "how to" guide when it comes to those three critical aspects of this penitential season.

Throughout this season we are given the opportunity to develop new habits and to break ourselves of those sinful behaviors in which we find ourselves all too easily entrapped. Perhaps we have traditionally always "given something up" for Lent and find that although it may have improved our physical health or when the 40 days are over, may have deepened our appreciation and/or enjoyment of whatever we have "given up", I would like to offer for your consideration the challenge to attentively "listen" to what you say. I am not suggesting that you carry a recorder around with you 24/7 so that you can become adjusted to listening to the sound of your voice. What I suggest is that you give due attention to what you are saying. What are the words you use? Do you use that gift of God in order to build up the kingdom or do you find that too many times you are using words which tear down community adversely affecting the promotion of the Kingdom.

St. Augustine's biographer, Possidius, points out that Augustine used to have inscribed on his table: *Let those who like to slander the lives of the absent know that their own are not worthy of this table* as a reminder of the need to resist the temptation to gossip and talking about people behind their back. How many times could you be

accused of falling into that same trap or have allowed others to fall into that trap while you just sat back and listened. These sins against the commandment to love one's neighbor are the sins we are called to turn from this Lent. Perhaps each time we brush our teeth, we can make it a time of prayer asking God to assist us in our desire to clean up what words we use and how we use them this Lent. That physical, habitual act can serve as a good reminder to each of us. Perhaps you will be able to turn those moments of dental hygiene into spiritual hygiene as well.

Let us, then, make it a point to be aware of the words which come out of our mouth this Lent. Let us make a conscious effort to listen to ourselves and if we don't like what we hear (not necessarily how we sound when we are saying things, but rather the actual things we are saying), then we can use this season wisely to practice the habit of watching (or rather) listening to our words. Let us be people who announce blessings to each other. These blessings are what will build up the kingdom which Jesus Christ ushered in. These blessing will then become words which build bridges instead of walls, which promote peace instead of violence, which ask for and grant forgiveness instead of vengeance. This Lent let each of us reflect on the sound of our own voice.....
What are you going to sound like this Lent?